At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the EU is in a process of fundamental change. It currently comprises twenty-five members and is likely to widen further over the coming years. In this larger and more diverse Union, the Franco-German alliance has increasingly been replaced by a changing pattern of multiple working relationships between various member states. This makes an assessment of individual member state European policy interests with regard to possible correspondences between them, ever more important. Britain and Germany, who are both undergoing a process of redefinition of their traditional post-war role in Europe, are a significant example of how the process of European integration changes the national preferences of member states.

Germany became a larger and fully sovereign nation once again in 1990, when the two German states were peacefully reunited as a result of the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War. The move of Germany’s centre of political power from Bonn to Berlin, has once again highlighted the country’s central position in Europe. Germany now acts as the bridge between Western Europe and the aspiring new member states from Central and Eastern Europe. The unified Germany is at the centre of Europe’s attention, both from the Western and the Eastern perspective. Hence it is a crucial player in the process of enlargement. The logical outcome, which became part of Germany’s inevitable post-unification re-positioning in Europe, was the willingness to take on greater responsibilities for Europe’s security.

As a result of having regained the full sovereignty over their country’s internal and external affairs, the new generation of post-war German leaders, who came into government after the end of the Kohl era in
1998, gradually abandoned the constraints that had characterised the semi-sovereign West German Bonn Republic. As a consequence of the normalisation of its foreign policy, Germany now carries the same rights and responsibilities as any other EU member state. With this comes a greater readiness on the part of the German elites to defend their own national interests against those of other EU member states.

As part of this process, the pretence of not having any national foreign policy interests other than the deepening of European integration, which had been maintained by the leaders of the Bonn republic to an almost unnatural extent, has come to an end. Without abandoning its traditional emphasis on multilateralism, Germany adapted its foreign policy to the changes in its post-unification status as a sovereign state. The country has made an inevitable transformation in order to avoid a situation where the increased external political weight would fundamentally contradict a foreign policy stance, which artificially maintains an altruistic attitude.

The United Kingdom has undergone a similar transformation. The New Labour administration shares none of the traditional fundamental objections against European integration, and has agreed to more pro-integrationist measures (e.g. the Social Chapter, the RRF, and a substantial extension of QMV) than any previous British administration. It also embarked on a reform of the political structures of the United Kingdom along the lines of the political framework of continental European states.

The decision to grant full independence and control over the setting of interest rates to the Bank of England is an important precondition for possible British membership of the eurozone. Moreover, through the process of devolution in the United Kingdom, which gave regional assemblies to Scotland and Wales (and could possibly be extended to English regions at a later stage) the government has initiated a process of decentralisation within the British state, where power has traditionally been centred in Westminster. Although it is still a cautious government with regard to Europe, in comparison to most other continental administrations, its period in office has marked a significant shift in British behaviour within the EU.

Under New Labour the country has become an active player in the EU policymaking process and reform discussions. Britain took a leading role in the establishment of a European RRF as a result of the events in Kosovo in 1998/99. It also became strongly engaged in the discussion on EU reforms in the run-up to enlargement in May 2004, both inside and outside the Convention on the Future of Europe. Similar to most other